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WEST VIEW

All-Night Babble-on With a Moral Hangover

BY GREGG KILDAY

Hollywood Babylon by Kenneth Anger (Straight Arrow Press: 14.95)

The fading Straight Arrow Press, in a farewell gesture as grandly self-indulgent as Gloria Swanson's triumphal march down that long, lonesome staircase in the final reel of "Sunset Boulevard," has just issued a new edition of "Hollywood Babylon," Kenneth Anger's underground classic, a self-consciously trashy scrapbook full of stars sex and scandal. Wearing a strategically retouched portrait of Jayne Mansfield on its cover, gaudy in its promiscuous use of photographs, outfitted in breathless large-scale type and carrying an appropriately extravagant $14.95 sales tag, this time out "Hollywood Babylon" is masquerading as a coffee-table gift book. It is hardly a convincing masquerade.

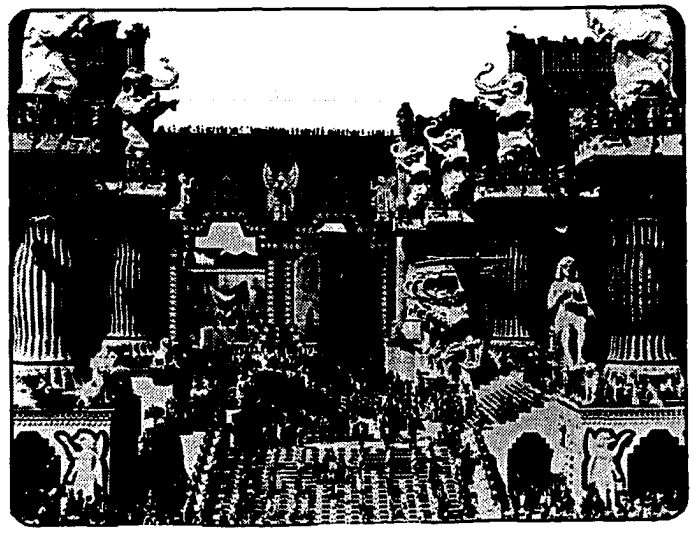
Coffee tables, indeed! "Hollywood Babylon" deserves to be hidden in a niche by the wet bar, for it is nothing if not a cocktail party book. Why, my dear, it even reads like a cocktail party. In great rushes of overstated prose. Tipsy with exaggeration. High on innuendo. "Hollywood Babylon" doesn't speak to its reader, it talks at him in the manner of an anxious young agent, on the make at a party he has crashed, eager to be mistaken for a promising new producer, the kind of guy who doesn't care if anyone listens to him as long as he's overheard.

Yet the first few times you page through "Hollywood Babylon," you're likely to find the experience quite giddy. Here, after all, are accounts of all the great scandals that gave tinsel town its tarnish. From Fatty Arbuckle's wild party to Charlie Chaplin's peccadilloes to Frances Farmer's day in court to Lana Turner's darling daughter. But like all too many a Hollywood party, if you linger beyond the initial, fleeting introductions, the tenor of the affair can become terribly meanspirited as the few registered celebrities in the room are quickly surrounded and outnumbered, crowded up against the wall, their backs to the buffet, shoved and jostled by their legions of attendants, by the ranks of competing aspirants, by the out-and-out pretenders. Beware. Under the influence of a gin and tonic, or even a chablis, the exhilaration that first comes with rubbing elbows with celebrity threatens to shade off into bitterness while anecdotes initially told with affection and amusement are repeated now with malice and with spite. The furious sense of dreams betrayed that Nathanael West attributes to the great unwashed is not restricted to those behind the police lines; though its nuances are subtle, it can also be spotted lurking behind the sophisticated, arched eyebrows and the oh-so-offhand cynicism of the specially invited guests.

"Well, you know the *full* story, don't you"—the conversation is almost too predictable—" 'Hollywood Babylon' began as a series of articles that Kenneth Anger wrote for the Cahiers du Cinema. (Though I can't imagine why that magazine chose to publish them. I've always heard that it takes itself so seriously.) But no matter, because as I understand it, the articles were later published in Paris as a book. Became quite a collector's item, if you can imagine.

"Of course, you've seen the pirated edition that that pornographer brought out here in '65. Kenneth was supposedly quite furious. They had translated his French into English rather poorly and if that weren't bad enough, the poor boy didn't get a penny. And the thing reportedly sold 2 million! But then scandal begets scandal, *n'est-ce pas?*"

Nor should it take the word long to circulate that "Hollywood Babylon," in its first authorized American edition, is a markedly different book. Rather than babble on in a great whoosh of undemarcated chatter—as was the pirated edition's wont—Anger has rearranged the dirt by chapter and verse, presenting each successive scandal in its chronological order. If the allegations are quite reckless, they are also surprisingly circumspect whenever it comes right down to the crucial detail whose revelation might lead to libel.



Consider that fateful night in 1924 when William Randolph Hearst invited half of Hollywood to a nighttime cruise on his yacht, the Oneida. According to Anger, the party was a carefully staged trap which Hearst himself had rigged in order to catch his inamorata Marion Davies in the arms of Charlie Chaplin, with whom she was rumored to be having an affair. Before the evening was over, the cruise was to become notorious—not because of Marion and Charlie but because it served instead as the occasion for the mysterious, unsolved murder of Western director Thomas Ince. Stepping in where even district attorneys feared to tread, the pirated edition of "Hollywood Babylon" planted the smoking gun firmly in Hearst's hand. The present edition chooses to record the moment in an ambiguous, intransitive sentence. Ince is its unfortunate subject, but his murderer is nowhere to be seen.

This "Hollywood Babylon" plays it safe by rehashing only those scandals that have long been in the public domain. Gone, too, are many of the living figures whose dark and perverse tastes were hinted at in the earlier edition. Where "Hollywood Babylon" was originally written with an iconoclast's disregard for all the consequences, it has been revised with a lawyer's devious tact.

Not only has the book become more calculating, it is also much more somber. Maintaining its wild and wicked demeanor to the end, the pirated edition closed with a paean to Jayne Mansfield, "Jayne, who has made Scandal her career, who assures us that the HOLLYWOOD WAY OF LIFE is still a good one." Maybe they aren't making sex goddesses as regal as they once did, Anger seemed to be saying amid all the pretended hysteria, but they're sure making 'em just as tacky.

Camp, however, isn't a tone of voice anyone can sustain for very long—at least, not without some strain. This new edition ends on an apocalyptic note rather than cry mock victory. In its final chapter, called "Hollywoodammerung," Anger chooses to focus—in pathetic and quite revolting closeup—on the ravaged face of Judy Garland, the prostrate body of heart-attack victim Lewis Stone, Sharon Tate's bloodstained doorway and Jayne Mansfield's fatal car wreck. The effect is sickening. Without warning, the background chatter of the cocktail party comes precipitously to a halt and you are uncomfortably aware of standing alone in the center of the room, laughing too loudly, swaying uncertainly, having just blurted out a joke that nobody finds funny. The brittle banter has turned lethal. The idle gossip is no longer innocent.

Which is, in fact, the point. Whether intentionally or not—and one tends to credit Anger with the intention—"Hollywood Babylon" is a telling fable about the evils of gossip. Although cast in the form of a scandal sheet, it is not the individual scandals but the atmosphere of gossip in which such scandals breed that is the book's true subject.

Anger begins his demonstration unobtrusively: Throughout the early pages of the volume, he appears to be simply having fun with the askew perspective of the fan magazine. Relating the death of Fatty Arbuckle's lover, he writes, "On Sept. 10, Virginia Rappe died, age 25, losing forever her chance to star in 'Twilight Baby,' " as if losing a part in a movie somehow makes her death more tragic. Further on, his target is the tawdry moralists who jumped at the chance to use l'affaire Arbuckle to decry their favorite vices. Anger undercuts them by mimicking their outrage. "In his forced retirement Arbuckle took to drinking heavily," Anger tells us, as he begins to pull out all the stops on the melodramatic organ music that swells beneath the text. "Bottles seemed to haunt him."

As Anger's book dredges its way through sordid decade after decade, it becomes more and more self-evident that whatever else it is, gossip is almost never neutral. Anger records the inside dope—the rumored drinking habits, the whispered sexual predilections, the hinted fetishes—that never made it into the papers and yet are common knowledge. Why? Because, in Hollywood, to know the latest scoop is a measure of your standing in an incestuous, inbred community. To gossip about the facts of another's career is to promote your own.

Such gossip loses touch with its subject. Its lack of sympathy leads to callousness. Anger never even bothers to give his murder victims and suicides a decent burial. His paragraphs shift abruptly and quite arbitrarily from corpse to corpse. Human lives are reduced to items and items are quickly dispensed with.

More insidious still is that gossip that goes public. Because then its victims' lives are reduced to mere ciphers, playing pieces in shrill games of moral monopoly conducted by the self-appointed guardians of the public good. If there are villains in Anger's generally amoral universe, they are Hedda Hopper and Louella Parsons. Photographed in action at, yes, a Hollywood cocktail party, they display the clumsy, leathery countenances of two blundering dinosaurs. Unmasked through quotations from their own columns, they are quite ferocious, frighteningly self-confident in their vengeful public sermonettes.

Anger selects as his martyred saint Frances Farmer, a casualty of their diatribes. Arrested in 1942 on a drunken driving charge, Farmer was confined two years later to a public hospital. Anger blames the denunciations that were heaped upon her by the courts and by the columnists for her downfall.

Time and again, gossip, once unleashed, has led to such monstrous campaigns. Although Anger's two-page treatment of the Red scare conducted by the House Un-American Activities Committee is most cursory, there is no doubt the rabid anti-Communists of the '40s were the heirs of the neo-Puritanical crusades of the '30s. A special chapter, laced with scorn, is reserved for Confidential magazine, which did its best to keep the worst traditions of yellow journalism alive and flourishing well into the '50s until its fallacious stories finally ran aground in court.

Gossip's fangs may have been removed, but its practice has not ceased. That "Hollywood Babylon" has already gone into a second printing suggests that gossip, even if it is now viewed only as light entertainment, will always have a market.

"Hollywood Babylon" is a deceptively dishy book that offers no hint of the wallop of a moral hangover that it packs. If it never tells as much as you might want to know about the stars, it forces you to confront more than you might be willing to admit about yourself.

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